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Hood's Texas Brigade: The Soldiers and Families of the Confederacy's Most Celebrated Unit

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Review

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Ural, Susannah J. *Hood's Texas Brigade: The Soldiers and Families of the Confederacy's Most Celebrated Unit*. Louisiana State University Press, \$48.00 ISBN 9780807167592

General John Bell Hood was not the first commander of the Texas Brigade, but he was at the helm when the unit won lasting fame during the battles of 1862 in the Eastern Theatre. Indeed, the Brigade compiled a distinguished record of service: Seven Days, Second Manassas, Antietam, Gettysburg, Chickamauga, the Overland Campaign, and fittingly, Appomattox. The Texans paid dearly for their glory. At Antietam in 1862 the Brigade suffered a 64% casualty rate; the 1st Texas Infantry alone lost 86% its members (128). Some 1,300 went to Georgia in 1864 for the late summer campaign; 570 because casualties (192). At war's end, only 617 men of the Brigade remained to surrender at Appomattox (250).

An illustrious outfit like the Texas Brigade, not surprisingly, has drawn the attention of historians eager to write the battle history of the unit. What Susannah J. Ural has done is to shed light on the social history of the Brigade. Indeed, only by integrating the details of the everyday life of the members with the ties of kinship that linked the brigade to its home community back in east Texas can a complete picture emerge. In one revealing detail, Ural writes of minstrel shows performing in the brigade camp (141). In November 1862, with winter approaching, one-third of the Brigade went without shoes, prompting a fundraising effort by their families. The home front sent to the front-line hundreds of socks, shoes, and other consumer goods to alleviate the suffering of the men (138, 141). Indeed, Ural's narrative emphasizes the vital role played by civilian communities in sustaining the combat motivation of the front-line units. As she makes clear in the opening, her book constitutes a "study of communities at war: the community the men built in their companies, regiments, and brigade, as well as the communities and families from which they came" (6).

Most of the brigade came from middle-class households of east Texas: blacksmiths, farmers, a few lawyers, urban professionals and skilled laborers. As Ural points out, this disparate group of men shared one common motivation to go to war in 1861. As she puts it, “Republican Party policies, especially the containment of slavery, posed a disastrous threat to” the social status and future prospects of these white Texans (2). Ural has compiled impressive statistics that clearly indicate the primacy of slavery to the Southern way of life, and the willingness of its white citizens to rush to the Confederacy’s, and slavery’s defense. The majority of the brigade’s officers came from slave-owning households; 88% of original captains in the 5th Texas Infantry owned slaves (37). Two-thirds of the privates did not own slaves but had strong connections to slaveholders in their communities (23, 37). Slavery gave every white Texan, regardless of class and occupation, a powerful stake in maintaining the racial status quo.

Ural points to various factors that accounts for the Brigade’s reputation as a fighting machine that retained its potency right to the end. The rank and file benefited from the skilled leadership of the brigade’s junior officers. The soldiers believed sincerely in the righteousness of their cause. Finally, their ideological identification with the Confederacy, the material and moral support given by their home community, and their determination to maintain white supremacy and black slavery helped sustain them through the years of hardship, bloodletting, and deprivation. In telling the story of the Brigade, Ural has connected the private social lives of soldiers with the critical role played by civilian communities in keeping the war going to its revolutionary conclusion. The Civil War, then, was a mortal struggle not just between armies, but between entire societies. The struggles and experiences of both the Brigade members and their families point to the larger issues of Confederate nationalism, combat motivation, and the postwar adjustment of Southern whites to a world where both legalized slavery and the Confederacy were no more, but where white supremacy still reigned.

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